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Is CIA polishing the image?

Bob Diehl

EDITOR'S NOTE — Sunday Times editor Robert Diehl was among Panax Newspapers editors recently attending a national defense seminar in Washington, D.C. This is the second in a series of impressions. Today — The CIA.

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The small, green and white road sign loiters inconspicuously among markers along Virginia's forest-shrouded State Route 123.

Only its message, "CIA," encourages drivers to do a double-take.

Even the sign — which indicates the rural northern Virginia location of the United States' revered but also maligned super-secret "spy" organization, the Central Intelligence Agency — has been subject of controversy.

The first sign went up at the order of President Dwight D. Eisenhower after his driver couldn't find the site when he went to lay the cornerstone of the new CIA headquarters building in November, 1959.

Two years later, President John F. Kennedy paid a visit as CIA personnel were moving into the just-completed headquarters on the secluded 219-acre compound. He had no taste for road-signs pointing to the government's secret intelligence agency, and ordered them removed.

For the next 12 years, there were no signs except those indicating a nearby highway research facility. Then, in 1973, the signs went up again at the direction of then director James R. Schlesinger. They have remained.

A PAVED DRIVE leaves the highway into the trees and gullies finally opening onto the compound guarded by sentry posts and a high

The headquarters building, although about eight stories high, appears squatty in its sprawl.

The greeting at the building entrance is friendly, almost casual belying the fact most guests undergo a thorough security investigation before being authorized entry...before arriving in Washington.

The reception area is as cavernous and barren as an indoor parking facility. Only a couple desks interrupt the glistening floor.

Guests are hustled to their destinations without extraneous excursions.

A conference room high in the building is carpeted and warm. Editors line the long, rounded table and the walls surrounding it awaiting Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Adm. Stansfield Turner. Two CIA agents — a man and women — sit near the door smiling, nodding and chatting. Their eyes continually pan the group.

ADMIRAL TURNER became the 12th DCI March 9, 1977 — a position responsible not only for the CIA but all foreign intelligence agencies of the United States.

The former commander in chief, Allied Forces Southern Europe, is soft-spoken, evasive about detailed CIA activities but candid about the agency's importance to national security and the bad press it has received in the 1970s.

Although apparently confident the CIA will erase the stigma attached to it and survive any internal morale problems, he admits there is evidence the agency did abuse secrecy in some past instances but insists there were more allegations than facts.

Attacks against the CIA stemming from intelligence hearings in the post-Watergate era have forced the agency to maintain a "fishbowl" operation, a handicap no other security organizations in the world carries, Turner explained.

Russia's KGB would feel hamstrung by the restrictions under which the CIA operates, he said. Even the intelligence agencies of America allies — Britain, France and West Germany — are given more latitude.

Turner said the next Congress will be asked to approve a charter for the intelligence community defining clear guidelines for espionage and covert activities, protecting American secrets and yet avoiding trampling of citizens' rights.

Currently, the CIA has "oversight mechanisms," safeguards against activities which might be counter to government policy or infringe upon civil rights, and methods of evaluating classified material.

They include weekly meetings with the President, an intelligence oversight board of three persons which reports to the President on Turner and the CIA and committees in each house of Congress to which Turner must report.

Contrary to some public and press opinion, the CIA does have close supervision.

Turner said, in his view, the CIA has lost, to some extent, the trust and faith of the American people and now faces the task of winning it back.

"We are forced into being a little more open," he said. "The CIA is operating a new model of intelligence, for the first time in the world."

The CIA is not a sinister organization operating without restraints, he stressed.

"We have to obey the law and the spirit of it. We can't give away what we're trying to defend — freedom and individual rights," he said.

ADM. TURNER, who describes the agency as a highly efficient one which is mindful of its public image, admits the American press has an obligation to be alert to wrongdoing.

"Your job is to oversee us," he said. "That's good but within limits."

Leaks are a real problem, he said. And, "there is too much of a tendency of people to look on a whistle blower as a hero. I don't feel you should automatically look at the whistle blower as hero.

"Don't get me wrong. I'm all for Woodard and Bernstein... and I would respect the whistle blowers if they went through the oversight mechanism first (before revealing secrets)."

"There is a difficult borderline area between the rights of citizens and the obligation of the government to protect its secrets," he said.

Citizens' rights should be defended, he added, but in doing so the government should not cripple the institutions charged with protecting those very rights from foreign interference.

Turner conceded intelligence agents and newsmen have a distinct adversary relationship. Agents collect and protect secrets. It is the newsman's duty to find out as much as he can about what is going on.